

Mr. Mansfield ---

My fellow VA colleagues...

On October 1... some 4,500 IT Operations and Maintenance employees were permanently reassigned to the Office of Information and Technology.

This major shift occurred as part of a multi-year effort to streamline and modernize the information technology (IT) environment throughout the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), by bringing our IT resources under more centralized control.

I appreciate this opportunity to speak directly to you about this reorganization.

The Secretary and I believe it makes the most business sense and offers the best approach for this department to maximize our IT assets.

We are fully committed to this reorganization as centralizing the IT function will enhance our operational effectiveness... provide standardization... and eliminate duplication.

Ultimately... the reorganization will improve the Department's ability to provide a platform of superior service and an environment of innovation in delivering the full range of benefits and programs to the nation's veterans. Better service to America's veterans is always the driving force behind change in our Department.

This transition is a big job and I have every confidence in the men and women of VA to accomplish it with success.

I am counting on you to continue to provide the same high level of service to the facilities you serve.

Your professionalism in expertly maintaining and operating our IT systems have been recognized for their significant contributions to the VA mission.

I am confident that this level of service will grow with the new capabilities that will be available through this realignment.

Your work is critical to VA's mission... and I thank you for your service and dedication.

During the past several months we have been talking with many of you in the field regarding this permanent reassignment and realignment of IT resources.

As a result of your input... we are making an effort to ensure that you are informed of the steps that are being taken to implement the change.

Secretary Nicholson and Mr. Howard... VA CIO... recently recorded a broadcast to share their vision for the realignment.

You can view this broadcast on the VA website noted below on the screen...

In addition... we will continue to post information on the OI&T website and provide regular updates by email.

Your supervisors and local and regional leaders will be conducting meetings and conference calls about the realignment over the coming weeks.

These are just some of the communication avenues available to you and I encourage you to take advantage of them as your input continues to be critical to our success.

But to personalize the reorganization and to show that all of VA is on board with the transition... I have asked the Department's senior leadership team to stress the importance of this reorganization... and to answer your questions and alleviate your concerns.

You will hear directly from them shortly... but for now... I'd like to introduce Bob Howard... the new Assistant Secretary of the Office of Information and Technology and CIO for the Department.

Bob was confirmed by the Senate on September 30.

We thank the Senate for their quick action.

Mr. Howard has a distinguished military and private sector career.

The President... Congress... the Secretary and I have every confidence that Mr. Howard will provide the leadership necessary to guide the Department through this challenging realignment working in tandem with other senior leaders of this Department.

Mr. Howard:
Thank you Mr. Deputy Secretary.

It's a pleasure for me to welcome our new colleagues to the Office of Information and Technology.

This is not only the first week of the new fiscal year... but the first week that operations and maintenance professionals throughout VA are joining O-I-and-T as a permanent part of our team.

People continue to work hard to make this transition a success.

But any change that involves nearly Five Thousand people is bound to have a few bumps along the way.

You have run into one of those bumps... don't hesitate to talk to your supervisor or a local human resources office.

They will either resolve the issue locally or relay it up the chain to the appropriate office.

Over the past few months... we have solicited feedback from VA employees at all levels throughout the country.

We know that you may have concerns about the impact of this IT transformation on veterans... on the IT customers you serve... and on you.

The entire leadership from the Secretary to the new Regional IT Directors to Facility-level managers share those concerns... so we have been focused on three goals:

First... that we continue to deliver the best possible services to our customers...

Second... to achieve our vision for the realignment: an IT management system that is more streamlined... more efficient... more nimble... and more responsive.

And third... to ensure that VA's IT professionals continue to work in an environment of innovation... with opportunities to advance in their careers.

I am confident we can achieve these goals because we have an exceptional team of skilled and dedicated IT professionals whose creativity and dedication have brought distinction to the Department.

In the feedback we've received... your single most important issue has been to ensure that this transformation will NOT have a negative impact on VA's mission to serve veterans.

That is a concern shared by all of us.

No matter what job we have at VA... we all are dedicated to that mission.

One VA is not just a slogan.

It's the ultimate goal of the IT team: to use technology to give every veteran a clear and simple path to the full range of benefits they've earned through their service to America.

We all have our charter directly from Abraham Lincoln: "To care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and his orphan."

It's a pledge made in the 19th century...but we are fortunate to have 21st century technology to help honor that pledge.

There are certainly business benefits from the planned transformation: more integration across Administrations... cost savings through standardization of equipment and processes... faster and more secure access to shared data.

Like you... the leadership team has our eyes fixed firmly on the people we serve.

We have worked closely together to ensure that there will be no harm and... over the long-term improve upon service to IT customers.

And now... I'd like to introduce Dr. Mike Kussman who heads our largest IT services customer Veterans Health Administration.

Dr. Kussman....

Dr. KUSSMAN:

Thanks Bob.

I appreciate the opportunity to be here today to talk about this important transition.

Let me begin by expressing my gratitude to those of you who were formerly VHA employees and are now members of the IT staff.

Your accomplishments have been an integral part of VHA's transformation in the past few years, and your contributions played an integral role in our ability to provide veterans with the best care available anywhere.

Thank you for everything you've done.

Your collaboration with VHA will continue as you transition to the new organization.

Change is challenging; and this transition is no different.

But I know how skilled you all are... and how talented you are.

And I know you will do whatever is necessary to ensure that this new approach will be successful... and to ensure that veterans continue to receive the world-class health care they have earned and come to expect from us.

Like you... I have been concerned about the impact a new IT management system might have on our medical facilities and our patients.

I did not want to lose the close working relationship we have between our systems, development and clinical staff.

After all... VHA IT staff really understood our unique needs since they worked arm in arm with us at our facilities.

They've worked closely with us to develop new applications that improve our health care delivery... and... incidentally, win awards and accolades throughout the country.

If we're so good, why should we change?

To me, as a physician, the answer is clear.
We have more than 7 million veterans enrolled for care.

We are proud of the support we give them every day.

But we don't give them the same care we offered five years ago. We give them the best that is available today—and we continuously seek out new methods, treatments and protocols to ensure that we are providing state-of-the-art care.

Access to the best technology is a critical part of our approach to clinical improvements, and the IT staff is essential in that process.

We have worked well together, and I have no doubt that we will continue to do so.

Bob Howard has assured me that we will continue to receive—at a minimum—the same level of service we have always enjoyed.

I not only have multiple channels for reporting any problems that might arise, but I also have a direct line to Bob Howard.

In the long run, I believe that this realignment will allow us to provide an even higher level of service.

The best concepts for software development have always bubbled up from the clinical professionals.

And their close work with VHA's and VA's IT professionals has resulted in world-class applications.

I want to continue to take advantage of those ideas and concepts and to support an environment of innovation and collaboration.

Under the new system, those ideas will be encouraged, and supported, and developed, and shared with all the Administrations.

I have another major reason for supporting the realignment.

Our veterans need One VA.

They need seamless service... powered by interoperability and secure data sharing.

When combat veterans leave the hospital, I want to be sure they won't have to submit their records multiple times to get access to employment and mortgage benefits.

When veterans die, I want to be sure that we guide their survivors through the burial benefits system without adding to their sorrows. Change is stressful, and the clinical care that you provide is more challenging than ever.

For this very reason, we must manage this transition carefully, and each employee must assume responsibility for ensuring its success.

All of us are committed to the electronic health record as an essential tool in our clinical armamentarium.

We must all work together to ensure its continued success and viability.

I've assured the Secretary and the rest of the leadership team that I support the IT realignment... and I have assured them that everyone in VHA will do whatever is required of them to make this transformation a success.

And I promise you that I will keep Bob Howard's phone number right here in my pocket.

If we need his help to resolve a particularly difficult problem, he'll hear from me.
Bob.....

HOWARD

And we will be responsive.

We've set up communication channels for every IT staff person to use.

For example, if an HR issue arises as a result of the realignment, staff should first contact their local HR office or use the IT chain of command.

If these issues cannot be adequately addressed via these channels, then staff should contact the IT Realignment Ombudsman, who can be reached at 866-225-4951 between the hours of 7:30 a.m. and 4:00 p.m.... Central Time.

Medical care is the most critical service we provide, but most veterans use the other benefits available to them and their dependents: education, home loan guaranties, vocational rehabilitation, compensation, pension, and life insurance.

Technology powers those services as well...
and no one knows that better than Dan Cooper.

Before he became Undersecretary for Benefits, he chaired our Claims Processing Task Force.
Dan ---

Mr. Cooper
Thanks Bob and thanks for having me here today.

That experience on the Task Force alerted me to the challenge facing us.

We, in VBA, must serve veterans better by reducing both the number of pending claims and the time needed to process them.

Like Mike Kussman, I -- too -- want to harness the innovative spirit of our IT partners to reduce the time veterans must wait for decisions on their claims.

The IT realignment supports that goal.

I believe that centralizing IT resources will help VBA achieve greater accountability and consistency throughout all our operations.

The change may be stressful.

We all find comfort in our routine, knowing exactly what's expected of us, knowing that everyday will be much like the last.

The large majority of my career was in submarines (both diesel and nuclear) – and any submarine sailor will tell you that routine and consistency are important; the last thing you want is a surprise!

But even on submarines, things change.

I was proud to serve originally on a diesel sub, then on several nuclear submarines; but, if I had a choice today between a diesel and one of the new nuclear subs, I wouldn't hesitate for a minute.
The nuclear submarine's advanced technology and increased capabilities are incomparable.

And VBA wants to give veterans the very best service we can provide.

We serve all our servicemembers, even on active duty.

During active duty personnel can take advantage of our Loan Guaranty, Education, and Insurance programs.

Primarily, though, we serve veterans.

An injured soldier leaves active service, receives medical treatment at VA hospital, and applies to VBA for compensation, vocational rehabilitation, or continuing education.

As he or she moves through this continuum of support, the records should move electronically up-to-date and secure – ensuring timely access to the services needed at the time.

It's technology that makes this possible along with the skills and dedication of our IT staff.

And you will continue to be OUR IT Staff no matter where you report administratively.

You have been and will continue to be critical members of the VBA team.

So if you're wondering if you're still invited to our meetings, social events and celebrations, the answer is YES.

And that goes for our teams and committees and working groups as well.

I look on this as an expansion of our IT staff; but, more importantly, it expands our technology horizon.

It is an opportunity to tap into new resources and to work in even closer collaboration with all of VA. Bob...

Mr. Howard:

When I hear Dr.

Kussman and Mr.

Cooper talk about their Administrations' appreciation for the IT staff, you can understand how glad I am to be working with this leadership team.

From the Secretary and Deputy Secretary to the Under Secretaries for health and Benefits and Memorial Affairs.

They see how the IT realignment will help them provide even better support for veterans and their families.

We asked Bill Tuerk, the head of the National Cemetery Administration, to talk about the role of IT in memorial programs for veterans. Bill.....

Mr. Tuerk:

Thanks Bob and thanks for giving me this opportunity to talk about the importance of this transition to the National Cemetery Administration.

It's easy to see the value of IT in modernizing surgical procedures in a VA hospital... and in cutting the backlog of claims... or providing a home loan guaranty.

But you might not think as often about the value IT can have in providing memorial benefits to the families of veterans who have died. At NCA, we are dedicated to honoring our fallen heroes and comforting their grieving families.

And we are committed to doing it with compassion --- and without delay.

We offer families full range of memorial services.

We maintain 123 national cemeteries in 39 states and Puerto Rico, as well as 33 soldier's lots and monument sites.

We work with grieving families to help arrange military funeral honors and to provide flags, headstones, markers, and Presidential memorial certificates.

We also have developed—with the help of our superlative IT professionals—a nationwide gravesite locator so that families, fellow veterans, and other interested persons might be able to readily identify where a veteran or other beneficiary is interred.

Of course, Bob, It is not enough to just offer these services; they must be delivered rapidly at the time they are needed.

Families who need us are grieving. Delay is never acceptable.

With many of our World War II and Korea veterans approaching the end of their lives, we have to respond to more requests for service.

This is where our IT people have been most valuable – indeed indispensable.

You have become our “force multiplier,” developing creative ways to help us provide comfort to a growing number of bereaved families.

They - you who are viewing this presentation - have truly become our partners in carrying out this hallowed duty... and I know we can rely on their continued support.

As my fellow Under Secretaries have noted, the changes required by IT realignment may be stressful.

They may even cause hardships or sacrifices for some of us.

But we all know that those will be minor hardships in comparison with the sacrifices our veterans have endured.

By working together, we can create a new system that will allow us to provide an even higher level of service to veterans and their families.

In the long run, nothing else matters. Bob...

Mr. Howard:

Thanks, Bill, for bringing us back to our charter.

No matter what our particular position is at VA, we all work together .

IT realignment is intended to help each of us do that to the best of our ability...

to continuously improve service to the veteran.

I know some of you are worried about this change, This is a complex undertaking.

But if we continue to concentrate on each small step along the way, we will be successful.

During this transformation, it will be my job to make it work.

Your job will be to keep your focus where it has always been on your customers and the veterans we all serve.

On behalf of all of us, thanks for doing your part to make this important transition successful.